

Unshackled

Stories of Transformed Lives

Adapted from "Unshackled" Radio Broadcasts

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Chapter One

Sunshine Harris Found the Place

THE OLD MAN dragged up the dark stairway of the Skid Row rooming house. His grey hair hung down from his head like an unraveling skating cap; his beard was so much dirty string. His greasy trousers ruffled at the knees. At the top of the third flight, he paused, then burrowed down the windowless hallway, pushed open the door to his bedroom.

"Whew, hotter'n the fires of Hades. Summer of '99's gonna beat 'em all," Old Harris complained and fell over half dozen empty whiskey bottles on the floor.

"Blamed dead soldiers," he said and sat down on a chair with a broken wicker back to rub his shin. Remotely, he eyed a cockroach scoot up a pile of boxes stacked in the corner halfway to the ceiling. He winked at his pictures of scantily clad girls, nailed to the wall in a row.

Then he got up and crossed the room to his dresser. He yanked open a drawer and shoved aside a handful of poker chips, greasy playing cards, dice, old campaign buttons and wallets.

He sifted twenty or thirty wallets through his hands. He peered in one. It was stamped "genuine alligator," with initials in gold, but it was empty. So was the second.

"Might as well get rid of these some day," he said to himself. "After I've lifted the dough outa them, they ain't no use to me or to their original owners." He dropped them all to the floor, kicked them under the dresser.

"It's too hot to stay put in this consarned room tonight.

Maybe I'd oughta go to the mission and praise GOD. But gotta get some cash for a drink first." He stooped down, picked up an armful of empty bottles. "I'll just turn in some empties and get

my drink on the way."

He jerked open the door and two cockroaches fell off the stained door frame and scurried toward the unmade bed.

Old Harris found a market for his empties on the next block. "Give me two straight whiskeys quick," he demanded. "And half a pint for my back pocket."

The half-pint in his back pocket squished as he lopped along Van Buren Street. "Yes, sir, it'll be the mission for Harris tonight," he said to nobody at all. "They's always good for laugh at the Pacific Garden-"

Outside the mission, an eager-faced fellow of seventeen dealt out tracts to the men streaming by. An ugly knife wound slanted across one cheek.

Old Harris queued up with the men on their way into the mission. But when he stood in front of the young boy he ignored the tract. "Well, well," he said, squinting up at the scar-faced youngster. "If it ain't slick-fingers Sammy, me old pal."

Without speaking, the boy pushed the tract into Harris' hand.

"And what's this you're giving me to read, Slicker, my boy?"

The boy backed away two steps. "It's - it's - well, I'm supposed to pass them out, and you're supposed to read them."

"Baht Whata' you doin' standin' out here in front this dump, and sober at that?" Harris said.

"Don't call it a dump," the boy defended. "To me it's a dump."

The boy hesitated, then said, "I gave my life to JESUS CHRIST last night. And you better get in and do the same thing. You been blasting and cussing GOD for years. GOD won't take it forever."

"He sure will, Sonny," Harris told him. "He has to."

"He does not," the boy said.

"Oh, yes, He does, because there ain't no GOD! No GOD an' no JESUS CHRIST an' no Heaven an' no Hell!"

Harris' thin cackle blew into the mission with the summer breeze. A man with a serious face came out and stood beside the young boy. "That's enough, Harris," he said quietly. "Sammy here gave his life to JESUS last night."

Harris bowed. "Oh, good evenin', to you. Gave his life to JESUS CHRIST, did he? Amen and amen. Wow!" He laughed, with a cackling noise that began down in his chest and oozed up through his nose.

"Excuse me a minute, please. I'd like to take just a touch of my cough medicine here." He pulled out the half-pint of whiskey, held it up to his mouth, rolled the liquor from one cheek to another, then gulped it down.

He opened his mouth wide, leaned over to the young boy. "Ah," he exhaled into his face. He stood back. "Excuse me, I didn't offer you a drink, Son."

The scar on the young boy's face twitched. "I don't want one."

"All rightee, all rightee. All the more for me," Harris gloated. He drained the half-pint. "And what about you, my friend. Aincha gonna invite me into the meetin'?"

The man nodded. "Harris, you're always welcome."

You have been for the last twenty years. One thing sure, nobody ever gets on the nerves of JESUS CHRIST. Come on in. Mrs. Clark is about to start the song service."

Harris tramped past him. The song service hadn't begun, but he was singing already.

Hallelujah, I'm a bum. Hallelujah, bum again. Hallelujah, give us a handout, To revive us again!

He jiggled down the aisle into a front seat. "Yippee!" he shouted. "Amen and amen! Wow!"

That summer of '99, Harris strayed into the mission often. "My room's too blasted hot," he told the bartender in the corner bar. "Funny smell up there when it gets hot," he confided.

"Ever try changing your bed?" the bartender asked. "Sure," Harris told him. He threw back his head and cackled. "Twice a year, summer and winter. Summers, I throw off the blankets. Winters, I pull 'em on."

At the mission, night after night, Harris slouched in a chair, but gave no more attention than he gave the cockroaches that played on his walls.

"Amen and amen. Wow!" He would call out in his thin voice.

Mission men showed no impatience. "We're glad you're here tonight, my friend. We hope you'll let off some of that steam by singing with us."

"Sure, I'll sing," Harris would shout.

Oh! Buffalo girls, won't cha' come out t'night, Come out t'night, come out t'night;
Oh! Buffalo girls, won't cha' come out t'night An' - dance by the light of the moon!

But one night he sat in his chair after the other men had filed out. Mother Clarke tidied up the hymnbooks in the racks, then sat down next to him.

For five minutes, Harris talked sensibly, respectfully.

He even mentioned GOD. Then he pushed his hands into the torn pockets of his suit.

"I don' wanta' keep ya', ma'am," he said.

"You're not keeping me, Mr. Harris," Mother Clarke assured him. "You know by now that nothing could make my Saviour and me happier than to know you wanted to talk about receiving JESUS."

"Who said anything about that?"

"We've been talking just now about your making peace with GOD. That has to be done through belief in His Son, JESUS CHRIST."

The old man pulled back. "You're a funny bunch of people here," he said.

"We care about you," Mother Clarke answered.

"Ffft." The old man sprayed a dribble of tobacco juice down his chin.

"We do."

"Oh, yeah, sure you'd like to save my soul. So's you could mark up another tally in your score-book."

"No, Mr. Harris, you're wrong," Mother Clarke insisted. "We care about the eternal salvation of your soul. We love you."

"Me?" Harris scratched his head.

"You."

"No refined lady like you don't care none about a smelly old goat like me." He tried to laugh.

A mission friend came and sat down beside him.

"You're wrong, Harris. Mrs. Clarke's not judging a man by human standards. She's seeing him through the eyes of JESUS CHRIST."

Harris stood up and pushed past the man and woman who sat looking up at him. "Bah! That's a lot of rot. You make me sick. The both of ya! I'm not scared of you, nor GOD, nor JESUS CHRIST, nor of burnin' in Hell fire. There ain't no Hell. And there ain't no GOD!"

He half ran, half staggered down the aisle of the mission. Out on the street, he went straight into the nearest saloon. Two hours later, he staggered out. He found Skid Row open-all-night spots and had a drink in each. Around nine the next morning, he stumbled into a bookstore and bought a New Testament.

Then he went home. He struggled up the three flights of stairs into the bedroom, kicked open the door, and fell on the mound of crumpled sheets on his bed.

He opened the New Testament. His head sagged forward as he focused his eyes on the page and read aloud in a thick voice: "Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee."

"Bah rot!" he scoffed. The book slid to the floor.

"Never heard of such rot in my life. Makes me mad."

He sat up, swung at two empty bottles with his feet and kicked them across the room. "Burns me up!" He crashed across the room after them, threw over a chair. "I'll tear this place apart, it makes me so mad." He stamped on the heap of blankets lying in the corner of the room, ground a pile of cigar butts into shreds on the floor.

Then he lay down again, breathing hard. "Thou fool - uh - this night. What was it? What was it, anyway? Lotta bunk - but I want to know what it said again. I gotta know," he mumbled up at the cracked ceiling.

He groped over the side of the bed for the book, came up with three old cigar butts instead. "Now, where'd I throw that Book? Oh - here - under the bed."

He lay back, opened the Book again. "Where in thunder was that verse? I'll have to start at the beginning, I s'pose, but I'll find. Yes, I will, if it takes me all week and I just lie right here readin'."

"The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham; Abraham began Isaac; and Isaac begat Jacob; and Jacob begat Judas and his brethren; and Judas begat Phares and Zara of Thamar; and Phares begat Esrom; and Esrom begat Aram-"

He finished the genealogy, but he kept on reading.

Through the account of JESUS' birth and baptism, through the account of the calling of His first disciples, through the Sermon on the Mount, into the ministry of JESUS. On and on he read, then - a parable.

"Thy soul is required of thee." He bounded off the bed, circled the room once, twice, three times. He stopped in front of one of the scantily-clad women on the wall and shuddered. **"Thou fool,"** he said. "Hey, I believe this stuff. I do."

He crouched on the edge of his bed. "I don't know why, but I believe it. I'm going into that mission tonight and I'm not gonna go there for laughs, either. I'll put my hand up in the air, and You, GOD, You gotta be there to help me."

That night, Harris edged down the Pacific Garden Mission aisle as cold sober as a visiting Sunday school superintendent. Not once during the message did he shout out "Amen and

Amen." At the invitation, both gnarled, dirty hands went high in the air.

"I want to pray," he told Mother Clarke. "Where can we kneel? Right here? Good."

"I'm fixing to pray. I'm fixing to ask GOD to clean me up. Lord? You hear me, can You? Here I am, like I promised. I ain't got no good in me to give You. It's all black and sinful and dirty. I'm sorry about all the times I cussed You, GOD. I'm sorry for it all. Come on, Lord, and clean me up. Clean me up, GOD. For JESUS' sake."

Later, on his way to his room, Harris shook his fist at the saloons as he went by them. He mounted the stairs in a hurry, went to his room. With one sweep, he ripped the pictures off the wall. "Don't belong here now, I'm a Christian." He dumped his dice, his wallets, empty whiskey bottles into one of the boxes stacked in the corner and shoved it out into the hall. "You're done, too," he said.

"Want a bucket of hot water," he told his landlady.

After he had scrubbed down the walls and woodwork, he scrubbed the ceiling, swept up his cigar butts, scrubbed the floor, and foraged for clean sheets. "Every thin's gotta be clean," he told his cronies. "I'm clean. I was washed in the blood of the Lamb, my Saviour, JESUS CHRIST." Then he laid his New Testament on the table beside the bed.

That was the story he told them at the mission, too.

And the "stew bums" and the derelicts believed him. "That's Sunshine Harris," they'd nudge each other and say.

Eight years later, Mrs. Clarke walked behind Sunshine; homeless men on the street, outside the mission, held battered hats and were silent. One of them scratched his head as he said, "Well - they may be takin' old Sunshine's carcass home, but one thing I know - his soul's done been with GOD since day before yesterday, when the old boy died."

"You mean that guy with the white beard and the clean shirt?"

"That's him. Used to be Old Harris, call him Sunshine now."

"That Old Harris? That cantankerous old cuss? Why, he was so foul-mouthed and rotten and dirty!"

"Yeah, yeah. But now he don't smell of anything but hair tonic, and he's been using it, on his hair."

"Huh! Well, if JESUS CHRIST can do something for that old 'souse,' I think I'm gonna go back to the prayer room too."

~ end of chapter 1 ~
